

Appendix E: MassWildlife Landowner Incentive Program (LIP)

The MassWildlife Landowner Incentive Program (LIP) is a partnership that provides private landowners interested in developing and maintaining wildlife habitat on their property with financial and technical assistance. State biologists are currently working with private landowners to enhance and protect important habitats across the Commonwealth.

To promote the creation/restoration of high quality wildlife habitat that supports wildlife populations, funding has been dedicated for on-the-ground activities that enhance wildlife habitat and provide benefits for species at risk. The State has adopted a competitive, cost-share grant program to financially aid landowners to meet that goal.

The MassWildlife Landowner Incentive Programs goals are:

- Identify and reclaim appropriate sites for management of declining habitats
- Manage and control exotic and invasive plants.
- Enhance wildlife habitat for *species-at-risk*. A *species-at-risk* is defined for LIP as any fish or wildlife species that is federally or state listed as threatened or endangered, is a candidate for listing as threatened or endangered, or is listed on the NHESP Official State Rare Species List.
- Provide technical and financial assistance and guidance to landowners on how to manage their property for wildlife.

Building Partnerships

The MassWildlife Landowner Incentive Program recognizes that landowner participation is fundamental to successful conservation of fish and wildlife and to meet the challenges associated with habitat management. The residents of Massachusetts genuinely love the land and improving habitat to support wildlife is important to them. The LIP Program establishes a partnership between State Biologists and private landowners to work toward their goals. Residents enjoy being an active partner in working to protect Massachusetts's rare and fragile wildlife. Partnerships are initiated through annual LIP workshops that promote and educate landowners about management of private lands that increase the biodiversity of Massachusetts through wildlife stewardship. These partnerships are reinforced with technical advice and concurrent site visits. These partnerships are established with long-term conservation goals in mind and the program seeks to establish collaboration with private landowners as a viable means of protecting our natural heritage.

Work In Progress

In its first years, the program will focus on the decline of early successional habitat and grasslands across the state. This conservation issue has been recognized relatively recently as a result of the maturation of the state's forests.

As agriculture was abandoned in the early 20th century, early successional habitat was abundant. Since that time, there has been a steady decline in early successional habitats, especially in southern New England. Many of the plants and animals associated with these early successional habitats have declined as well.

In addition to focusing on early successional habitat, the program will focus attention on land associated with species-at-risk and with priority natural communities. As of 2001, Massachusetts has records of 435 species listed under the Massachusetts Endangered Species Act (1990) including 253 plant species, 72 vertebrate animal species and 110 invertebrate animal species. Records have also identified 105 unique terrestrial, palustrine and estuarine natural community types. The management of these habitats on private lands will help to recover these declining species and natural communities.

Meeting LIP Goals

The potential for private property owners to contribute to biodiversity conservation in Massachusetts is enormous.

The Northern Redbelly Cooter (*Pseudemys rubriventris*) population is estimated at 300 breeding age individuals currently located in 17 ponds and one river. The recovery goals include a reclassification to Threatened status when the breeding population has reached 600 individuals distributed among 15 or more self-sustaining populations. Restoration and management of nesting habitat on private lands will advance the timetable for reclassification and aid in stabilization of the population (Amaral 1994). Much of the habitat for the Northern Redbelly Cooter (federally Endangered) is in private ownership and owners are seeking advice and support for creating and managing nesting habitat for this species.

The northern population of Bog Turtle (*Clemmys muhlenbergii*) is listed as Threatened by USFWS and Endangered in Massachusetts by the Natural Heritage & Endangered Species Program. More than 50% of Bog Turtle habitat in Massachusetts occurs on private land. There are two populations classified as good sites and one site classified as poor. Management of vegetation to prevent succession from occurring and defending sites from invasion by non-native plants figure prominently in recovering populations of this species. Since much of the currently occupied habitat occurs on private lands, progress toward delisting Bog Turtles would be made by implementing active management at these sites and restoring potential sites (Klemens 2000).

Recent data show that 32% of the Massachusetts population of Piping Plovers (*Charadrius melodus*) occurs on private lands, representing 11% of the entire Atlantic coast population. Additionally, 34% of the Massachusetts population of Least Tern (*Sterna antillarum*) and 46% of the state's population of American Oystercatcher (*Haematopus palliatus*) also occur on private land. Breeding and stop-over areas are major concerns for the MDFW and landowner participation in this area is imperative for shorebird conservation.

The last remaining wild populations of Sandplain Gerardia (*Agalinis acuta*) occur on private lands. The recovery goal for the species requires a survival probability of at least 95% over a 100 year period. In addition, reclassification to Threatened status requires the establishment of three viable populations across three geographic units. The participation of private landowners is vital to achieving recovery of the species (USFWS 1997).

The USFWS has developed a woodcock management plan to address the dramatic population decline of that species. In the Northeast, the management goal is to restore woodcock populations to 1985 levels by the year 2005. Conservation and management of early-

successional habitats are critical to achieving this objective. Private landowner participation in this effort is crucial (USFWS 1996).

The Partners-in-Flight plan for the Southern New England Physiographic region identifies early successional scrub/ pitch pine barren habitats and grassland/agricultural habitats as being needed to help reverse declines of Golden-winged Warbler, American woodcock, Prairie Warbler, Upland Sandpipers, Henslow's Sparrows and others. Their objective is to create and maintain roughly 85,000 ha of shrub habitat, and 10,000 ha of grassland habitat to sustain the suite of species requiring these habitats. Public lands cannot provide this habitat alone. Private lands will need to provide the bulk of this habitat (Dettmers and Rosenberg 2000).

During the life of the program the early-successional habitat management component of LIP will contribute a total of 675 acres to the habitat of early-successional and grasslands habitat for numerous declining species. Reclaimed/maintained areas will also contribute significantly to the USFWS goal of 1 million acres of enhanced/restored upland habitats.

The Future of LIP

As the Landowner Incentive Program develops and expands, we will address many issues of habitat management. Other areas needing attention will be focused on in forthcoming years. State biologists will continue with outreach to allow more landowners to take advantage of the program.